

The mystery of creation is that life and death coincide, falling and rising, rising and falling seem to be of its essence, a continual flow, two aspects of the same coin. Without death, one might say life would come to an end. Onto this mystery, we've mapped our own mystery: why we, as creatures, have been given the burden of realising the mystery of this creation and our place in it. The realisation in John's gospel of Christ as both the creative Word and the one who dies for us on the cross is one way of answering this: the cross becomes a symbol expressing the hope that the coincidence of life and death which we experience in our daily lives is no accident of survival, not merely an evolutionary mechanism, but how being, in a sense, maintains itself, how God is at the heart of being. Now, before this becomes too abstract, one has also to focus on the full horror of the cross, as well as its glory. The failure on Friday of the bill to approve assisted dying, or more exactly, the terminally ill adults end-of-life bill, has aroused strong emotions because many people face an excruciating period of pain and indignity at the end of their lives, and want an end to it sooner rather than later. The last thing they want to hear is abstract theological reasoning, at least not one that doesn't also enable funding for a more merciful ending in the form of hospices and palliative care. In other words, the Christian response can never simply be, "This is what God is demanding of you, get on with it." Christ dies on the Cross as a symbol of God's love for us and for creation in the most vivid and real way possible: as one just like us in all things but sin. He could have chosen otherwise, but as we heard in yesterday's parable of the unforgiving debtor, this only makes sense if we embrace its meaning of 'God as mercy' in our own lives too. The Cross is both a symbol of hope in John's Gospel: a throne of glory, a place where death and resurrection coincide, and also a challenge - to give our own lives in the service of others. Assisted dying is one way of doing this, but the problem lies with who does the assisting. The Cross is also a symbol of God's desire to forgive us our sins, but we remain subject to sin and imperfection. God as mercy also demands that we are merciful to ourselves and one another in our judgments of what the next most loving thing to do may be. The only answer I know to this, as a Christian, is to place my hope and prayer in the Cross of Christ, as a sharing in our own. I need Christ to carry that Cross for me. I cannot do it alone.

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